
RADOSŁAW RUSNAK

TO KONSTANTYNOWA SOBIESKA ON HER LEAVING ŻÓŁKIEW: ON A TRANSLATION OF THE LATIN *OCTAVIA*

Abstract: The paper discusses a translation of the Roman tragedy *Historia albo tragedia Oktawii cesarzówny rzymskiej* (History or Tragedy of Octavia the Roman Emperor's Daughter) by Józef Jan Woliński, published in 1728 and completed shortly beforehand. Its author presents himself as a faithful servant of the Wessels and dedicates his adaptation of the first-century praetexta *Octavia* to Maria Józefa Wessel, Konstanty Sobieski's widow. The translator adapts the Latin text, on the one hand emphasising Nero's ferocity and despotism, on the other employing the stereotype of the abandoned wife. The cruel emperor is charged with all the responsibility for the evil which consumes Rome and his relatives, while Octavia is depicted as a fragile and passive victim of his malice. However, the translator does not disregard the protagonist's intimacy with her brother and her nurse. Woliński underlines the moral aspect of the drama, hinting at the imminent collapse of Nero's power and his violent death by suicide, which does not feature in the original. By removing Octavia's final lamentation, the Polish translator makes her follow her nurse's advice and desist from expressing her grief. Given Woliński's closeness to his benefactors around the time of writing his *Historia albo tragedia*, it seems plausible to suggest the drama was privately commissioned, and conceived as a solace to Wessel's concerns when handing her beloved estate at Żółkiew to her odious brother-in-law, Jakub Sobieski.

Keywords: *Octavia*, translation, Józef Jan Woliński, Maria Józefa Wessel

Driving from the frontier crossing at Hrebenne towards Lwów (present-day Lviv), one sees the imposing outline of Żółkiew (present-day Zhovkva) to the right. The town, with its ancient and attractive collegiate church and castle, was, in the first years of the eighteenth century, associated with the figure of Maria Józefa Wesslówna. She is well-known to avid read-

ers of memoirs¹ and to biographers of the Sobieski family, and those who visit the Church of the Benedictines of the Blessed Sacrament in Warsaw can see where her remains were laid to rest. But she should equally be remembered by the students of the heritage of Antiquity during the Polish Baroque, for an extraordinary twist of fate led to the rendering of a remarkable translation of the Latin *Octavia* in the entourage of the widowed royal granddaughter. Once attributed to Seneca yet probably written in the Flavius era, the sole fully-preserved *tragoedia praetexta* focuses on the conflict between the despotic Nero and his abandoned and sorrowful wife shortly before her banishment to Pandateria. Even a cursory reading of the Żółkiew adaptation suggests that it owes its existence to this powerful antagonism; the preface to the text confirms that Wessłówna's personal circumstances towards the end of her residence at the Ruthenian estate had their impact on the work's genesis.

The sole copy of the drama entitled *Historia albo tragedia Oktawii cesarzówny rzymskiej, córki Klaudiusza cesarza rzymskiego, a potom małżonki Nerona* (...) [History or Tragedy of Octavia the Roman Princess, Daughter to Claudius the Roman Emperor and Later Nero's Wife]² is stored in the University Library in Warsaw (No. 4.22.5.22). The damage to the first page of print does not allow us to decipher the remainder of the title, nor a poem on the crests of Rogala and Janina. Preceded by three lyric poems *Na imiona Najjaśniejszej Pani* [On the Names of Her Highness] and an extensive dedication, the work covers the next twenty-four pages of the volume; its publication has been established as 1728, probably from the print shop of Warsaw's Piarist College (Korotaj 1965).³ There is no indication of this not being the original, nor is the Latin version printed alongside, which only corresponds to the significant freedom with which the original was transformed. This is not only limited to the different names

¹ The tribulations of the wife of the youngest son of King John Sobieski inspired Sabina Grzegorzewska's *Pamiętnik o Maryi Wessłównie* [A Memoir of Marya Wessłówna], a picturesque if somewhat overfictionalised adaptation of a diary by one of the protagonist's wards, Maria Klementyna Wessłówna (Grzegorzewska 1965).

² All English translations of Polish texts are by Jan Rybicki unless otherwise stated. This is also true of English translations of Polish translations of Latin texts. They were kept as close as possible (without compromising the points in the Polish versions discussed in this paper) to existing direct English translations of Latin texts.

³ We might also consider a note by Kraciski: "WOLICKI (Josef), his tragedy *Octavia the Roman Empress* translated from Latin AD 1728 is **in print** (emphasis R.R.; Kraciski, 1781: 580).

of some characters – Praefectus becomes *Rotmistrz* (Sergeant), Nuntius becomes *Strażnik* (Guard) – or the frequent modernisations.⁴ This Polish version, unlike Bardziński's more "orthodox" rendering,⁵ does away with the choral parts, and the final lament of the titular protagonist is replaced with the scene of the despot's flight, absent in the original. Despite the significant deletions, the translator's tendency to expand particular statements makes his *Historia albo tragedia* (1066) longer than the original (983) by almost a hundred lines.

Little is known of the translator, signed as Józef Jan Woliński⁶ under the dedication to the work. This otherwise unknown amateur poet describes himself as an old servant of Maria Józefa's father, Stanisław, and then of the Princess herself; he enjoys the hospitality of the Żółkiew estate "having lived his years in service." It is easy to imagine him among the numerous clients gathered around Wessłówna and living off her generosity;⁷ among them, Woliński stood alone in his literary interests. By his own confession, "wishing to avoid harmful idleness in his free residency," he was going through the available books that included the Roman tragedy of *Octavia*

⁴ Woliński does not depart from the general trends in translation of his era when he mentions a *hetman* (the title of the Polish commander-in-chief at the time) (ll. 1004–1005) and artillery (l. 328); or when he makes Octavia exclaim: *O mój mocny Boże* (Oh my powerful God; l. 196) and Seneca speak *o boskiej wszechmocności* (of divine omnipotence; l. 656). And the fragment on the Bronze Age must have made the translator reminisce on scenes he knew of Sarmatian provincial life and produce his own additions:

Decipere volucres crate vel
Tenero laqueo
(ll. 412–413)
Albo sztuką zwodzić lotne ptaszki,
Kuropatwy, przepiórki chwycić, zbierać w taszki.
(ll. 245–246)
(Or by art to trick birds of flight,
Partridges and quail to capture and bag.)

⁵ Another translation of *Octavia*, published thirty years earlier, closes the volume *Smutne starożytności teatrum* [The Sad Theatre of Antiquity] by Jan Alan Bardziński (1696). It has been impossible to verify if Woliński used the Dominican's version in any way.

⁶ A monographer of the Wessel family notes a Jan Woliński, administrator of the estates at Kokoty and Wólka Kikolska at the beginning of the eighteenth century; he cannot be identified with any certainty, however, with the author of *Historia lub tragedia* (cf. A. Sikorski, in print).

⁷ "The castle at Żółkiew became a shelter for impoverished gentry, old warriors and families down on their luck," writes Aleksander Czołowski in his study "Dawne zamki i twierdze na Rusi Halickiej" [Ancient Castles and Fortresses in Galician Ruthenia] (Czołowski 1892, quoted in Osiński 1933, 211).

and was struck by the idea of translating it into Polish. Considering the cultural sophistication of the Sobieski court, it is not surprising the old resident could lay his hands on a copy of the *praetexta*, published together with nine dramas by Seneca, as was then the custom. This is even less surprising when one recalls that Żółkiew's own royal theatre opened for each visit from the victor in Vienna.⁸

It will remain a mystery whether *Historia albo tragedia* was written to be performed on the local stage. Yet both the choice of the adapted text and the moment of its dedication to Wesslówna are hardly coincidental. The main motifs of Woliński's work and, in consequence, its main idea, are all revealed in the introductory monody of *Octavia*, which is much different from (and shorter than) its Latin original.

The mythology-filled lament of the ill-fated protagonist, to the rhythm of successive plaintive apostrophes, is replaced by a detailed inventory of the misfortunes that befall her and her family. The sole cause of all these calamities, Nero, is only mentioned as *tyranno* (l. 33) at the end of the original; in the translation, he fills the entirety of this "theatre of crime" with his grim presence. He is referred to by most verb forms in the text: *wyrzuca z pokojów moich* (he evicts me from my chambers; l. 8), *na wygnanie zdaje* (he condemns me to banishment; l. 9), *zmyśla zdrady i jadem napelniony łaje* (he plots treason and scolds, filled with venom; l. 10). He is also responsible for all the evil in the country. Despite historical records, he is not only guilty for the death of Britannicus (*brata zabija okrutnie*, "he kills my brother cruelly," l. 13), but also for that of the previous ruler, Claudius (*ojca truże*, "he poisons his father," l. 13).⁹ To the detriment of the despot, this absolves Agrippina; Tacitus' *Annals*¹⁰ describes her as stooping to kill her husband to ensure the succession of her beloved son.¹¹ The translator does

⁸ Roszkowska notes four such performances: of May 1675, July 1684, February 1686 and at the inauguration of the pontificate of Alexander VIII (Roszkowska 1969).

⁹ Octavia mentions Nero's complicity in Claudius's murder in her later statements: *I ojca Klaudyjusza ruinować mego/ Zamyślił* (And he resolved to ruin my father Claudius; ll. 38–39), *ojca zamordował* (he murdered my father; l. 51).

¹⁰ This is clearly stated in *Annales* XII, 66–68 (Tacitus 1895, 226–227).

¹¹ The translator behaves much in the same way towards Claudius, who is the object of many bitter statements by the Housekeeper. *Historia albo tragedia* mentions neither his preference for his stepson over his son nor his marrying his niece. Likewise, the death of Lu-

this with a purpose, to which he employs the persona of the murdered Em-press throughout the piece. There is yet another symptomatic modification to this entirely remodelled prologue: for reasons quite beyond the text of the play, Woliński prefers to start his plot at dusk: *nastąpiła noc gruba* (a dense night had fallen, l. 2) rather than at dawn: *surgit Titan* (l. 3).¹²

The antagonist himself only appears on stage in line 437, when he enters in a dispute with his Stoic tutor¹³ on the best methods of government. Long before this, all the other speakers ensure this entry has been well prepared. Octavia, her Housekeeper, Seneca and the latecomer, the Ghost of Agrippina, describe the ruler in no uncertain terms, from a madman “cruelly opposed to good counsel and the innocent” (*dobrej radzie, niewinnym srodze przeciwnemu*; l. 738) to “a bad tyrant” (*złym tyranie*; l. 265), “crueller than an executioner” (*okrutniejszym od kata*; l. 142), who deserves no better than to fall into the abyss and to be consumed in sulphuric fire (ll. 233–234). Identified with “a spiteful serpent” (*zjadłym wężem*; l. 140) and “a furious bear” (*niedźwiedziem wściekłym*; l. 223), the Emperor is terrifying in his very appearance. His rejected wife shudders when she recalls his “terrifying face, fiercer than Mars, / Filled with venom, worse than a dragon” (*twarz straszną, od Marsa sroźszego, / Jadem napelnionego, od smoka gorszego*; ll. 109–110).

The animalistic feature in Nero’s characterisation is also visible in Octavia’s dream vision in Act One, with the highly dramatised scene of the death of Britannicus:

modo trepidus idem refugit in thalamos meos;
persequitur hostis atque inhaerenti mihi
violentus ensem per latus nostrum rapit
(ll. 120–122)

cus Silvanus is blamed on the present Emperor. The accusation of indifference following his demise is also withdrawn (*nulla prolis suae/manet interumbras cura*, ll. 138–139). Instead, Claudius is supposed to live in peace, away from the cruelty of life.

¹² The anonymous author of the *praetexta* begins the plot of his work with the first rays of the sun, in a clear reference to Seneca’s dramatic technique, known from *The Madness of Hercules* and *Oedipus*, to mention but two. The fact that Nero was strongly identified with the Sun is also of importance here. This is why the morning scene triggers such negative emotions in Octavia (Castagna 2000: 26).

¹³ Seneca reacts to the entry of his charge with fear that does not suit his opinions: *horreo* (l. 437); Woliński prefers not to elaborate any further. In this he differs from Bardziński, whose translation contains the confession *boję się struchlały* (I am petrified with fear) or the seventeenth-century Siennese Hettore Nini, who develops this into a whole phrase: *io mi sgomento, e tremo nè sò quai cose ne la mente volga* (I fear and tremble, and I know not what things are all mixed up in my head).

jak na jawi
 Ucieka do pokojów, a tyran go dawi,
 Goniąc onego skoro po mojej łóżnicy,
 Mieczem błyskając ostrym, i szuka zdobyczy
 Krwi mojej. On się tuż tuż około mnie kręci
 A tyran z mieczem strasznym do boku mu leci,
 Gwałtem go w serce już, już, widzę, przebijając.
 (ll. 73–79)

(true as life
 He flees into the rooms, and the tyrant smothers him
 Chasing him quickly around my bedchamber,
 With his sharp sword gleaming, and seeks his prey
 My own blood. Now he circles quite close, close around me,
 And the tyrant rushes to his side with a terrible sword,
 I see him now, now violently piercing his heart.)

Nero is like a predatory animal here: not only does he track (*persequitur*), he also smothers (*dawi*) and seeks his prey (*szuka zdobyczy*), encircling it and rushing to its side (*do boku mu leci*). The violence of his movements are evidenced by the monosyllabic repetitions (*tuż tuż, już już*), and the horror of the scene is enhanced by the sword gleaming in the dark like a wild beast's eyes.

The image of the despot is complemented by his own words and deeds. The opinions he voices, his response to the news of revolt and his orders to the praetorians betray an inner conflict typical of all worldly autocrats: a combination of a belief in his omnipotence with constant persecution mania and fear for his own life.

Nero's declarations, often cast in highly emotional moods, confirm Octavia's words that he "heeds neither any Roman estate/ Nor the gods themselves" (*na żaden stan rzymski/ Ani na bogów samych*; ll. 39–40 or *spernit superos hominesque simul*; ll. 90). He has only contempt for the people who have elevated him to the imperial throne: *Każdemu tu dokuczę panujący srogo* (I shall harass everyone with my cruel reign; l. 538) and he swears a painful death to all his enemies: *Miecz obosieczny żwawy małego z wielkiego,/ Niech traci tych obecnych, jako i zbiegłego* (Let my swift double-edged sword despatch the small and the great, those present and the refugees; ll. 523–524). The ardent appeals of his old tutor and the example of Octavian Augustus, merciful to his enemies, are to no avail. The Caesar boasts of his omnipotence: *Nie mam obligacyi, nie dbam o nikogo* (I have no obligations, I care for nobody; l. 537); *To prawo u mnie, co chcę* (What

I want is the law here; l. 667) and he disdainfully rejects words of caution: *Właśnie uczyć staremu nierozumne dziecka/ Należy, co u piersi zażywają mleczka* (Let the old man teach thoughtless children,/ who suck milk at their mothers' breasts; ll. 417–418), he announces pitiless destruction of his opponents: *Godzi się i mam umysł wszystkich tak wytracić* (It is fitting and I have a mind to exterminate them all; l. 408) and goes so far as to challenge the gods: *Przez moc moję i onym rozkazywać będę* (Through my power I shall command even them; l. 429). He has no time for the good of the country; the annihilation of his political adversaries is supposed to lead to a general cataclysm that will ruin the Republic *tak wyniosłą i dumną* (so arrogant and proud; l. 540):

I co jest w Rzymie, to ryczałem
Najwyższego niech ginie i o ziemię padnie,
Na samo dno piekielne niech wszystko przepadnie
(ll. 478–480)

(Whatever there is in Rome, may that all
Die like the greatest and fall to the ground
To the very bottom of hell may it all vanish)

A great fire could certainly satisfy the despot's desire for catastrophe. This vision flares up in his imagination at some point and releases a violent euphoria. With typical mercilessness, Nero wishes to feast his eyes on the fire, as if it were a work of art, and to revel in it as he would at Bacchanalia:

Z mecenaryi wieże dobrze się przypatrzę
Różnym kolorom ognia, co ich prochem zatrze.
Niechaj różna muzyka wydaje swe głosy.
Śmiać się będę i wesół. Niechaj pod niebiosy
Echo idzie i z armat potężnie niech biją,
A Rzymianie buntowni niech jako psi wyją
(ll. 989–994)

(I shall have a fine view from the tower of the Mecenatē
At the various colours of the fire that will turn them to dust.
Let all kinds of music sound their different voices.
I shall be laughing and merry. May the echo
Ascend to the skies and may cannons roar
And the rebellious Romans may howl like dogs.)

The original lacks not only this speech, but also any mention of the Great Fire, which, indeed, was to destroy the Eternal City. Still, it is hardly surprising that Woliński preferred to disregard the anachronism and to use this powerful instance of Nero's degeneration.

A person of such unfettered arrogance can be irritated to the core when his actions are opposed. This is the origin of the Emperor's hatred for Octavia. While the original version emphasises the aversion the protagonist shows for her husband (*vultuque signa proderent odium mei*; l. 542) and Octavia's discreditable kinship with the faithless Messalina (*Incesta genetrix detrahit generi fidem*; l. 536), the Polish translator introduces yet another reason: hatred for his wife enters his heart when Octavia reproaches him for the death of her loved ones: *Bo dla krewnych pobitych tak mię uraziła./ Stąd nienawiść do siebie w serce me wraziła* (Because she has offended me for her slain kin./ And this is how she put hatred for herself into my heart; ll. 601–602). No wonder, then, that she is the first to be blamed by Nero for the protests when they eventually erupt, and that he calls her an instigator: *I ta, która swą sztuką miasto poburzyła./ Skryte fakcye teraz na wierzch wynurzyła* (And she who had pushed the city to rebellion with her art./ Now made various plots come to the fore; ll. 971–972). An entirely different view is presented by the Guard in his function as a messenger. He heaps reproach upon Nero for his iniquitous treatment of the Empress and strives to present the spontaneity of the revolt (ll. 921–930).

The ruler reacts with extreme annoyance to the sounds of the protests that reach his palace. On the one hand, he hyperbolises the violence of the plebeians (ll. 1014–1020); on the other, he berates the Praetorians for their indolence (ll. 1004–1008). Yet this seeming bluster in the face of real and present danger is accompanied by fear and rising panic. The very same insecurity that made Nero inveigle spies into Octavia's entourage (ll. 45–46) and *osadzić* (to surround) the palace *wartami zbrojnemi* (with armed guards; ll. 763–765) is transformed into hysterical frenzy as the mob approaches:

quod non cruor civilis accensas faces
extinguit in nos, caede nec populi madet
funerea Roma quae viros tales tulit
(ll. 822–824)

Jak tu ufać i komu? Niebezpieczeńść wielka.
Gdybym się był nie postrzegł, byłaby omelka.

Zuchwałość sroga gminu na moje zgubienie
 Pałace, miła ze mną, w ogniste płomienie
 Chcieli przywieść
 (ll. 963–967)

(How can I trust anyone? The danger is great.
 Had I not noticed it, I would have been deceived.
 The mob's brazen insolence, intent on my destruction
 My palaces, my beloved with me, into fiery flames
 They desired to bring)

Yet even then he does not abandon his chronic distrust and suspicion. While, in the original, the Emperor sees the approaching Prefect and is still able to praise his loyalty: (*rara pietas*; l. 844 and *fides nota*; l. 845), he remarks in *Historia albo tragedia: Ale w tym mało wiary* (yet he is of little faith; l. 996) and is even more critical of the soldiers who are supposed to defend him: *Tylko fałsze, kolory i nic przyjemnego* (nothing but falsehoods, dissimulation and no pleasantness; l. 998).

The tyrant ends his presence on stage with equally shameful comportment. Unlike the anonymous author, who abandons his character when Nero, still boastful and convinced of his power, sends the Prefect away with a death warrant for Octavia, the Polish translator is clearly interested in completing the story of the Emperor so that his reign of crime be met with just punishment. This is why he replaces the scene of the Empress's funereal *kommos* with an epilogue: a short scene with the Messenger bringing bad news. Wasteful of dramatic potential, Woliński does not allow the unexpected newcomer to speak, and summarises the news in the stage directions,¹⁴ and then puts its paraphrase in Nero's mouth:

Nowa trwoga dopiero już na mnie napadła.
 Wszystkie radości i myśl dobra mi odpadła.
 Mam wiadomość, sam widzę, iż wojska prowadzą,
 Z wieże wysokiej patrząc. Siedzieć tu nie dadzą.
 Rzymianie, chytry zdrajcy z prowincji postronnych,
 Podstępują tuż pod Rzym w pułkach swych ogromnych
 Na sukkurs buntownikom
 (ll. 1059–1065)

¹⁴ *Wtym Kurier przybiega z przeciwną nowiną, iż na sukkurs Rzymowi liczne Rzeczypospolitej wojska podstępują* (Here the Messenger arrives with the fateful tidings that numerous armies of the Republic are approaching to succour Rome).

(A new terror has assaulted me.
 It strips me of all joy and good thought.
 I have received a message that they are bringing armies in
 I can see them myself from my tall tower. They will not leave me in peace.
 Romans, sinister traitors from faraway provinces
 Are now approaching Rome in their huge regiments
 To help the rebels)

Not unlike Henryk Sienkiewicz in his *Quo vadis* many years later, the translator strives to accelerate the plot and, ignoring the demands of history, he delivers fitting retribution on the iniquitous ruler. As in Sienkiewicz's bestseller, retribution is meted out by Servius Sulpicius Galba, whose troops succeed in reaching Rome, and whose coup gives him the Imperial throne in Nero's place. This retribution, one must add, occurs immediately after Nero condemns his ex-wife to banishment and a lonely death. The mechanism of infallible justice which allows no tyrant to wallow too long in his impunity is particularly swift here, and the heartless despot receives tangible proof that there is but a short distance from the summits of triumph to utter downfall.

Although Woliński spares the reader the image of the antagonist's death by suicide, the translator's aim is fully achieved. The Emperor's frantic last moment escape attempt: *Darmo ich tu czekać./ Dodaj mi konia prędko. Muszę stąd uciekać* (No reason to tarry./ Give me a horse. I must flee; ll. 1065–1066) serves to ultimately discredit Nero's loud boasts of omnipotence; conforming to the work's moralising logic, the hunter becomes the prey. Instead of Octavia, whose life is spared by a happy turn of events, it is Nero who is forced to leave Rome and it is he who will soon meet a violent death.¹⁵

This development is foreshadowed in earlier fragments of the text, where the impending end of Nero's power is made quite clear. Fair warning to his charge is given by Seneca: sacrilege must bring gods' wrath upon the ruler (ll. 431–432). The Emperor prefers to believe in favourable Fortune rather than in the gods, but the philosopher is adamant: *Jest ktoś większy nad nią* (There is one greater than it; l. 438). Impending punishment is also mentioned in her harangue by Agrippina, who does not limit herself to generalities in her pessimism: *Poznasz, jako co oddadzą./ Krzywda, żalność i mściwość dla ciebie się zwadzą* (You will see how they repay

¹⁵ Suetonius' story follows a similar principle: he states that the Emperor's death occurs on the very day he orders Octavia's murder (Suetonius 1914: 179).

you./ Harm, sorrow and revenge shall rain down upon you; ll. 709–710) and *Przyplacisz okrutności ty krwią swoją drogą* (You will pay with your blood for your cruelties; l. 720); in fact, she is quite thrilled to foresee her killer running from the frying pan into the fire. Her prognosis is even more credible, as she utters it as a voice from the Beyond, whose knowledge of the future is more certain than that of any living person:

veniet dies tempusque quo reddat suis
animam nocentem sceleribus, iugulum hostibus
desertus ac destructus et cunctis egens
(ll. 629–631)

Jednak przyjdzie ten dzień
I czas go opuści, i sprośnie zginie weń.
Od wszystkiego bogactwa i imienia dobrego
Odstąpić razem musisz i w lochach głodnego
Zażywać wczasu będziesz, dekokt wodny pijąc,
Głody przymierać dobrze i jako pies wyjąc,
Narzekać na nieszczęście. Już się nie powrócisz
Do pałaców rozkosznych, zmysłów nie nawrócisz.
Uciekać sprośnie będziesz, jesteś osądzony
I na widok Rzymu będziesz przywleczony
Od żołnierzy, którzy cię szukać pilnie będą
I tak cię okrutnego tyrana pozbędą.
(ll. 765–776)

(Yet the day will come
And time will desert him, and he shall shamefully be destroyed.
All his riches and good name
You must desist and, hungry in a dungeon,
You will rest, drinking nothing but a watery drink,
Suffering hunger and howling like a dog,
Complaining of misfortune. You will not return.
You will run in shame, you have been judged
And you shall be dragged for all Rome to see
By the soldiers who shall seek you out
And they shall do away with you, cruel tyrant)

Thus, in one way or another, the scene of the Emperor's shameful flight is present in the Polish translation of *Octavia*. Rather than performed on stage, it is told a number of times by figures of authority and is foreshadowed as a prophetic sign in Poppea's nightmare, in which Nero, instead of

cutting the throat of her little son (*ensemque iugulo condidit saevum Nero*, l. 732), cuts his own: *Wtym widzę i Nerona srodze zranionego,/ Mieczem własnym po gardle wcale przebitego* (I can see Nero, severely wounded,/ With his throat quite pierced by his own sword; ll. 861–862).¹⁶

Standing opposite the tyrant is Octavia, rejected and awaiting her doom. The unambiguous terms in which the Polish translator treats this character continue in the following pages of the drama. Her endless complaints of Nero's criminal behaviour are accompanied by evidence of injuries experienced by the protagonist. This consistent image of *mulier dolorosa*¹⁷ is furthered by exhibiting her various losses, by the clash between her former happiness and her present humiliation. In the Polish translation, the sudden turn of the tables has been rendered in a lucid antitheses: *Co się dzieje! Wesele w smutek przemienione!* (What is happening! Joy changed into sorrow!; l. 23), *Com była panią sobie, w niewolę-m oddana/ Być niewolnicą* (I, who have been my own mistress, I am given into captivity/ To be a slave; ll. 56–57).

Her change of fate is made even more painful by the fact that Octavia suffers as the daughter of Claudius, respected for his good service to Rome and as a descendant of a family tracing its lineage back to the gods. The heavens deliberately respond to Nero's sacrilegious deed by sending the revolt that will eventually destroy the Emperor. This providentialist interpretation of the current events is interpreted by the Guard (ll. 933–938), who does not conceal his support for the rebels in the Polish version, as is evidenced by his partisan report of the events in the city. He differs quite considerably from his Latin counterpart, whose role in the anonymous work is that of a terrified observer of mob violence.

The Guard in Woliński's work finds an unexpected opponent in the Commandant. The latter reacts to the former's approval of the rebels with

¹⁶ The Polish author must have misunderstood the sense of the original, where, it is true, the object of the deed has not been clearly indicated; all the more so as the death of Crispinus takes place at sea, as stated in the Prologue.

¹⁷ Experts are almost unanimous that the author mainly presents Octavia as a sufferer. The most explicit interpretation, a strictly Christian one, is suggested by Köhm: just as Nero embodies the Antichrist, Octavia embodies the suffering of the Saviour. The various views on this have been presented by Castagna (2000: 42–43).

doubt in the success of resistance: *Daremna chciwość ludu mścić się na potężnym/ Monarsze, opatrzonym wojskiem swym porządnym* (It a futile desire of the people to take revenge on the powerful/ Monarch, defended by his well-appointed army; ll. 951–952). Interestingly, his counterpart in the original, the Choir, sums up Nuntius's revelations in a truly Senecan manner: the reason for the expected defeat of the plebeians is sought less in the military dominance of the despot than in the power of Amor, under whose auspices the treacherous Nero is supposed to act. The Polish Commandant is uninterested as to whether moral qualifications based on mythology might be dubious. He prefers to limit the discussion of the events to the real odds of victory on both sides and, once again, to emphasise the Emperor's recklessness: *Umysł jego co myśli, aż strach o tym mówić./ Dla miłości, którą ma, wszystkich chce wygubić* (What goes in his mind is too terrifying to say./ For that love of his he wants to exterminate them all; ll. 955–956).

Octavia's identification with her cherished lineage, which she now sees receding into the past, is partly expressed in her closeness to her late brother. Described as *braciszek kochany* (beloved little brother; l. 71) and *najmilszy brat* (dearest brother; l. 146), Britannicus, who, when still alive, *świadczył zawsze swą assystencyją* (was always ready to help; l. 65) and *powagę czynił miłą* (was kind and serious; l. 66), maintains contact with his sister in the Beyond. And the bloodthirsty Nero not only hunts him mercilessly in dream visions, but also becomes an obstacle to brother and sister in the real world: *z bratem słowa nie da rozmawiać* (he won't let me say a word to my brother; l. 64).¹⁸

The figure of Britannicus is given a special function in the Polish translation. The import of his violent death to this tale of vindicated virtue and punished vice appears in the scene of his cremation, which the Nurse recalls as follows:

Britannice, heu me, nunc levis tantum cinis,
et tristis umbra; saeva cui lacrimas dedit
etiam noverca, cum rogis artus tuos
dedit cremandos membraque et vultus deo
similes volanti funebris flamma abstulit
(ll. 169–173)

¹⁸ The theme of the transcendental is absent not only in the original model but also in Jan Alan Bardziński's translation, despite the latter's even greater insistence on the Emperor's responsibility for the young man's death.

Już z jego ciała lekki popiół leci
 I smutna umbra ducha w obłok nęci
 Gdzie i macocha krwawe łzy wylewa,
 Kiedy stus ognia członki dopalewa
 Taki mu pogrzeb sprawił niechętna,
 Przedtym okrutna, teraz po nim smętna.
 A przez płomienie widzi, jak by z bogi
 Zasiadać będzie, a ona też w nogi
 Od stosa: i tak przysługę skończyła,
 Jad i złość swoją w smutek obróciła
 (ll. 123–132)

(Now light ash falls from his body
 And the sad umbra draws his ghost into a cloud,
 Where his stepmother sheds tears of blood,
 While the wooden pyre burns away his members.
 Once cruel, now she mourns him.
 And she sees through the flames how with gods
 He shall sit, and so she moves away
 From the pyre: and thus ended her service,
 Having turned her venom and anger into sorrow.)

The phrase *deo similes*, which places the text of the *praetexta* in the context of typically Senecan reflection on the fragility of youthful charm, becomes, for the translator, a vantage point for a highly Ciceronian image of the dead man's posthumous glory; the flames of the funeral pyre less complete the act of destruction than, revealing their purifying and sublimating function, serve as a veil to a much better reality. Unlike Octavia's, his brother's sacrifice has found its tragic consummation, and while the martyrdom of the Empress is only hypothetical, the heroism of Britannicus is all too evident here, as is the vision of his reward in Heaven. As such, the fate of Claudius's son can be seen as a projection of Octavia's as well.

The validity of this hypothesis is confirmed by the response to the young man's triumph in his persecutor Agrippina. This is the second significant component of this image. It must be surmised, after all, that the sudden transformation of the stepmother, that personification of cruelty, venom and rage, into a mourner bewildered by pain, is nothing other than a germ of evil's final defeat. Woliński clearly loves to attach Christian implications to fragments of the drama, or at least to those that seem to agree with his creative strategy.

Yet it would be a mistake to maintain that – in the face of the dynamics with which evil manifests itself – Woliński wishes to reduce his protagonist to a passive and powerless victim. On the contrary: her somewhat violent streak, which cannot be ignored in the original,¹⁹ has been amplified by the translator and used for his own aims. For it is from Octavia's lips that the most powerful insults fall against the persecutors, and it is she who demands punishment for the culprits in the most decisive terms. She calls her husband's arrogant mistress Poppea (*superbam paelicem*; l. 125) ugly, swollen with pride, *świecącą cudzymi darami* (glittering with other people's gifts; l. 85), and would happily see her on a bier. To the hateful Nero she wishes not only a death by fire (*obruere flammis*; l. 228), but also *rozbiecia głowy grzmotem* (that his head be split by thunder; l. 209), that he fall into an abyss and be buried under mountains. Even the Roman people cannot avoid her criticism for their excessive patience and passivity, unworthy of their warlike ancestors, with which they have suffered injustice: *Każdy tu milczy nie myśląc o niczym./ Jakoby w złotym pokoju siedzieli/ Albo nieszczęścia swego nie widzieli* (Everyone here is silent and thinks of nothing./ As if they sat in a golden room/ Or could not see their own misfortune; ll. 242–244). All these fiery anathema, although only verbal (and Octavia is not strong enough to truly threaten her husband's power) serve to further stigmatise the cabal of her foes.

The protagonist, impulsive and outspoken towards her enemies, is nevertheless capable of much tenderness and earnest attachment. These two personal dispositions are equally important in their impact on Octavia's psychological profile, and Woliński's enhancement of both brings out, in turn, the antagonism between the two, to which he applies his own moral judgement. The first side of includes all the hateful aspects, who trigger fiery anger even while epitomising innocence; the other is that of the victims, who are superior to the former in their ability to love and in their deep and lasting commitments.

¹⁹ Signs of Octavia's violent streak have been noticed by Giancotti, who writes of a peculiar combination of frailty and ferocity in the character: "*L'anima dell'eroina è intuita come un misto di debolezza e di violenza e la debolezza e la violenza non sono lontane fra loro*" (The soul of the heroine has been designed as a blend of weakness and violence, and weakness and violence are not so far apart; quoted in Castagna 43). A similar opinion was voiced almost a century earlier by Fabia (Castagna 2000: 44).

Such a commitment unites the Empress with her Housekeeper, as well as with her late brother.²⁰ This is primarily visible in how the Housekeeper reacts to her charge's torments. Not only does she bring comfort to her, but she also seems to be thinking of her more frequently than in the original. Upon hearing of *the shades of Styx* (*Qui me Stygias mittet as umbras*; l. 79), the Nutrix in the Latin original only tries to dispel the bad omen (*Omina quaesio sint ista procul*; l. 80); the Housekeeper in the Polish translation sees symptoms of desperation in this statement and does her best to alleviate it by applying heartening advice as an antidote, not without a providentialist perspective: *Te rozpaczy, proszę cię, niech idą na stronę./ Miej myśl dobrą, nie trwóż się, masz bogów obronę* (Do leave these despairs./Be of good cheer, have no fear, you have the gods' protection; ll. 25–26).

It scarcely matters that most of this advice is unfounded; what counts is the attempt to dispel dismal thoughts. Particularly striking is the colourful mirage the Housekeeper paints for her mistress, ostensibly with a spurious belief in Nero's kindheartedness:

tu modo blando
vince obsequio placata virum
(ll. 84–85)

Tylko wesolą miną staw się w twojej mowie
Neronowi, a uznasz: będzie cię szanować,
Cesarzową się stwierdzi i pięknie panować
Będiesz kontenta z sławy, żyjący szczęśliwie.
Toć radzę, jako stara sługa, niefałszywie.
(ll. 30–34)

(Just keep a merry face in your speech
To Nero and you will see: he shall respect you,
Treat you as his Empress and beautifully you shall reign
Content with your fame, living happily.
This I advise earnestly, as your old servant.)

She reiterates the likelihood of the return to her employer's earlier position when she closes a discussion of the Emperor's fickle love affairs

²⁰ Thanks to his innocence and similar age, Britannicus was better suited to be Octavia's intimate than, say, Messaline, who embodies licentiousness, or Claudius, treated unequivocally in the original and clearly neglected by Woliński; the translation does away with the Nurse's initial speech, which recalls the political contributions of the previous Emperor (ll. 34–56).

with a decisive statement: *Bo wkrótce przyjdiesz do swojej godności* (For soon you will regain your honours; l. 194). She does not cease to believe in heaven's protection, which will not, in her view, allow the present situation to continue for much longer. As she voices her conviction, the Housekeeper is entirely free of the doubts that continue to assail the heroine of the *praetexta*. An avenger is already waiting and the joyful day will come:

forsitan vindex dues
existet aliquis, laetus et veniet dies
(ll. 255–256)

Bo kara od którego boga jego czeka.
Zemści się w krótkim czasie i przyjdzie dzień jasny.
Tobie z pociechą, jemu będzie ciasny
(ll. 254–256)

(For punishment from a god awaits him.
Vengeance is upon him and a bright day shall come,
For you solace, for him dire times)

The final differentiation of their fates, enhanced by the persuasive power of the ellipsis, leaves no doubt as to the impending change of roles.

To further enhance the relationship between Octavia and her Housekeeper, Woliński even distorts the plot of the original. Just as he allows himself to modify fundamentally the finale of the tragedy, he transforms the ending of the extensive first act, mostly filled with dialogue between the two characters. Troubled by the futility of her insistence, the Housekeeper breaks off her reminiscing and again appeals to Octavia to keep her sorrow in rein, to let “healthy advice” be her guide and to “take care” of herself (*Lepiej byś ty o się sama dbała, / I zdrową zawsze przed się radę brała*; ll. 277–278).

The added ten-line fragment ends on a highly surprising note. Hoping to appeal to her charge's sensitivity, the Housekeeper claims that she herself might despair and threatens to take her own life: *Ja też w rozpacz wpadnę. / Pójdę się topić, od sztyleta padnę* (I, too, shall succumb to despair. / I shall go drown myself, die by the dagger; l. 272). The Empress's reaction is as violent as we might expect. Seeing her Housekeeper leave, Octavia ardently confirms her obedience, interspersing her appeals with strong terms of endearment:

Babusi, mamusi, hej! Naniusieńku, wróć się!
 Stój! Zmiłuj się! A teraz nie zabijajże się!
 Już cię będę słuchała: podaj mi sposoby
 Rady swej! Cobym miała czynić i czego by
 Strzec się, już więcej żalów moich poprzeszane,
 Bo z tobą żyć pospołu i umierać pragnę.
 Przecie baba ucieka! Muszę onę gonić
 I prośbą błagać swoją, od śmierci ubronić
 (ll. 283–290)

(Granny, mamma, hey! Nanny, come back!
 Stay! Have mercy! Don't kill yourself!
 I will obey: show me what to do,
 Advise me! What should I do and what
 To beware. I will now cease my sorrow,
 For I desire to live and to die with you.
 The woman is still running away! I must chase her
 And beg her with pleas, and prevent her death)

The static character of the protracted dialogue clearly displeased the translator, which is why he decided to make the finale more dramatic, bringing the two characters to highly violent behaviour. The Housekeeper's rapid movements and her radical statements are in step with the utterances of the frightened Octavia. The perspective of losing her beloved confidante liberates Octavia's previously concealed feelings for her Housekeeper, which is why she calls her "granny" and "mamma." This reveals the significance of the old servant to the heroine, deprived of her parents and her brother: the Housekeeper is part of Octavia's non-existent family and must urgently be prevented from dying. What is more, Octavia wishes to be as closely united with her in both life and death. This shows her as seeking support in her loved ones. Her greatest injury is in the emotional sphere. Orphaned and cruelly wronged by fate, unable to find support in her husband, who holds her in contempt and leaves her for another, Octavia seeks closeness with those still faithful to her.

The melodramatic resolution of Act One, almost equalling the drama of the tragedy's finale, might have been dictated by the tastes of Woliński's first anticipated readers. Still, the author did not have to look very far to be inspired by such a device. Threats of suicide aimed at inspiring compassion and thus to affect a change in another's strong resolve were also used by characters in Seneca's tragedies. Hercules' heart melts as Amphitryon

draws his sword and the former desists from punishing himself. Theseus threatens his own nurse with torture and death, thus crushing Phaedra's resistance and making her reveal the name of her alleged rapist.

It should be added that when Octavia rushes off stage to follow her agitated Housekeeper, the former leaves the stage for good. The translator removes the final scene from his text, a *kommos* in which the heroine bids farewell to Rome to sail to her uncertain future at Pandateria. The modified plot of the Polish translation makes this scene partially irrelevant, since – as we have said – events take an unexpected turn, and Nero's power begins to crumble before he is able to pass the condemning verdict. But the final scene loses its relevance for yet another reason: the Empress has been able to maintain her resolve and, conforming to her Housekeeper's instructions, she ceases to shed idle tears and finds solace and relief in her confidante – such, at least, seems to be the meaning of the heroine's last words. In a sense, Octavia becomes a character who “betrays” the victim model known from the *praetexta*. Although Woliński uses her words to move the reader and to accentuate the image of the despot, he does so with restraint and up to a certain moment, since he prefers to present Nero and his deeds in a direct fashion.

Woliński's creative goal, only too evident and expressed in the manner in which the tyrannous Emperor and the star-crossed Octavia are presented, leads us to ask why such far-reaching modifications of the original were made, or even to inquire into the origins of the translation itself. It certainly makes sense to seek this reason in the immediate circle of the translator, who produced no other surviving work; the more so as Woliński himself unequivocally stresses this in his dedication, identifying the dedicatee with the Roman Princess depicted in the piece:

Seeing in this translation, much like dirty water brightly mirrors the sun, the constancy of Your Royal Highness, bearing cruel tides of fortune in a way almost unfitting to the gentler sex, stronger indeed than the masculine, truly Christian, for supported by daily worship, sweetened with contemplation and with hope for heavenly bliss, I have resolved and dared to dedicate and to devote this tragedy of the Roman Princess and Empress to everlasting memory, a poor effort which, generously, as you are a generous lady, I beg you to receive.²¹

The consoling function of the work, supposed to comfort the widowed princess amid “the tides of fortune,” becomes even more lucid when one

²¹ Woliński, 3r–4v.

remembers the peculiar ending of the first act. Convinced to desist from sorrow, Octavia becomes, for her modern alter ego, Maria Józefa Wessłówna, a model of courage when faced with ill fortune and a guide in finding solace among her loved ones. For the two women, the hope that could be fulfilled much sooner than either of them suspected consists in the ruin and the ultimate downfall of their chief persecutor.

Obviously, Nero is the inveterate oppressor of the heroine of Antiquity. One can only speculate as to the real counterpart of the colourful character of the Roman Emperor.

The first idea that comes to our mind must be rejected. Despite his initial conflicts with the Sobieski clan, Poland's reigning monarch August II continued to shower favour upon Wessłówna, less because of any authentic partiality than because of the general esteem enjoyed by the daughter-in-law of his great predecessor. This is why Maria Józefa could always count on an entourage such as that which accompanied her to Żółkiew in 1720 (Bartoszewicz 1867: 714) and on a fitting welcome on her every visit in the capital.²²

Wessłówna's headaches – especially at the time when *Historia albo tragedia* was written – were for another cause entirely. The conflict with her brother-in-law, Jakub Sobieski, very much an enemy, made her leave her beloved estate near Lwów and move to Pomerania with a much smaller court than what she had been used to when her husband was still alive. Jakub strove to have his sister-in-law's annuities declared null and void, and obtained a favourable settlement in the spring of 1727; as a result, Wessłówna obtained Tygenhof (present-day Nowy Dwór Gdański) in the Malbork Province in exchange for Żółkiew, Pomorzany and Tarnopol, inherited from her husband (Sikorski 1999: 197).²³

If one is to trust the report of Sabina Grzegorzewska, this was a particularly painful time for the Princess, and her legal problems with the uncompromising Jakub filled her whole entourage with grim uncertainty. As to Jakub himself, he became the target of such opinions as the following:

²² Bartoszewicz's account runs as follows: "At public entertainment the King always gave the most exalted place to the widow, *née* Wessłówna, of the Royal Prince Konstanty Sobieski, who would arrive to Warsaw from her Pilica estate for every homecoming of the King. He made sure she always came first, even before Anna Orzelska. He opened each ball with a dance with her. For Princess Konstanta (as she was nicknamed) the King had but cold respect; August's love was for Anna (Bartoszewicz 1880: 60–61).

²³ The text of the settlement is said to have been part of the Krasieński Library (Piwarski 1939: 102n).

“he no longer knows what he does and nobody can enlighten him, and it is supposed to be Heaven’s decree.”²⁴

The scene of the departure from Żółkiew acquires, in Grzegorzewska’s memoir, the form of a heart-rending ceremony. Among the general lamentation, tears and outbursts of sorrow, Princess Sobieski bids farewell to a throng of her subjects of all classes, gives her hand to be kissed by representatives of the clergy, and is given a laudation by the local parson. If the author’s fictionalised approach does not stray too far from fact, the crowd gathered around the carriage being readied for departure probably includes the aged poet, brandishing this singular evidence of his attachment to the one departing: his translation of an ancient drama, in which the personal problems of the Sobieskis find their arch-model in the history of Imperial Rome and a fitting form in a Classical tragedy.

trans. Jan Rybicki

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²⁴ This authentic quotation comes from a letter by Maria Józefa Wessłówna to Anna Radziwiłłowa and was published in *Gazeta Warszawska* in 1860 (quoted in Z. Lewinówna, Introduction to Grzegorzewska 36).

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